

## Review

# Charles Busch – Alone With a Cast of Thousands

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## *Vivid Inventor of Characters*

By BERNARD WEINER

That talented monologist Charles Busch is back in town – at the Valencia Rose through tonight, then at Studio Rhinoceros starting Thursday – and he’s well worth a look-see.

Actually, monologist isn’t quite the word to describe him. The androgynous-looking Busch is more like a storyteller/comedian/actor/actress, a mix of Lily Tomlin and Ruth Draper, Whoopi Goldberg and Charles Pierce.

He doesn’t just “do” characters – he invents and plays them.

In some of his sketches, Busch could be compared to a one-man-band, wailing away at a dozen instruments at once. For his monologues, he concocts all the characters, some of them unseen but powerfully “there,” and then essays all the roles – using no props, the simplest of “costume,” and on a stage inhabited only by a chair. Quite remarkable.

Last year, his sketches were somewhat more far-out, even ghoulish at times. This time around, the 28-year-old actor presents three, somewhat more traditional, playlets. The first involves Busch impersonating a multitude of characters; in the later two, he delivers monologues to unseen others.

The long, 45-minute opener, “A Theatrical Party,” centers around the interactions at a cocktail soiree hosted by a veteran actor about to go on tour with three Shakespeare plays. He’s searching for a leading lady to play Ophelia, Juliet and Cleopatra.

Busch doesn’t impersonate the host, though the gentleman is vividly present, but he does create the other characters – actresses who want the assignment, a sleazy drama critic, a pompous mystery writer and his dimwitted ladyfriend, the maid and her streetwise lover, et al. – by varying inflection, posture, accent.

The illusion of different personalities is reasonably well done, though more in the quick-sketch mode than in-depth character study, and the writing (though it tends to go on a bit too long) is fairly sharp.

In this and Busch's other sketches, there's a tendency to get too sentimental, but, by and large, he's able to walk the fine line between melodrama and intense naturalism without slipping too often.

"Reed" is a poignant, 15-minute monologue by a hustler who, having had nowhere else to go, answered a personal ad of a lonely South Dakota woodsman. On the basis of his lies, he was invited to come and stay. Now those lies exposed, the situation is tense and Reed senses that the "butch rustic," as he calls him, is going to ask him to leave.

Reed alternately attacks and woos his (unseen) lover, revealing much about his life and state of mind in the process. The ending is touching, mysterious and painfully real.

In the 15-minute "Apré Moi, le Deluge," a nelly high school drama teacher, fired from his job as a result of his having tended bar at a gay hangout, attends the opening-night show directed by his successor and talks to a variety of people in the lobby during intermission.

In this playlet, the situation facing sensitive, talented teachers – gay or not – is embellished with understanding, tenderness and anger. But the fact that the teacher is flamboyantly swishy adds another, more political dimension to this sketch, which was co-written with director Kenneth Elliott.

Busch assumes so many roles, is so much the "on" actor, that I found his curtain call – when he comes out, somewhat shyly, relates to his audience unencumbered by pretense – quite touching.

This edition of "Charles Busch – Alone With a Cast of Thousands" plays at 8 o'clock tonight at Valencia Rose, 766 Valencia Street, and at 8:30 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays, September 6–30, at Studio Rhinoceros, 2926 16th Street.

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